THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

A TALE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY IN THE TIME OF SILAS WRIGHT

By

IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF
EBEN HOLDEN, D'RI AND I, DARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES, KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

—14—

So saying he handed me this letter:

"Canterbury, Vt.,
"June 1.

"Dear Sir.—I am interested in the boy Barton Baynes. Good words about him have been flying around like pigeons. When school is out I would like to hear from you, what is the record? What do you think of the soul in him? What kind of work is best for it? If you will let me maybe I can help the plans of God a little. That is my business and yours. Thanking you for reading this, I am, as ever,

"God's humble servant,
"KATE FULLERTON."

"Why, this is the writing of the Silent Woman," I said before I had read the letter half through.

"Rovin' Kate?"

"Roving Kate; I never knew her other name, but I saw her handwriting long ago."

"But look—this is a neatly written, well-worded letter an' the sheet is as white and clean as the new snow. Uncanny woman! They say she carries the power o' God in her right hand. So do all the wronged."

"I wonder why Kate is asking about me," I said.

"Never mind the reason. She is your friend and let us thank God for it. Think how she came to yer help in the old barn an' say a thousand prayers, my lad."

Having come to the first flight of the uplands, he left me with many a kind word—how much they mean to a boy who is choosing his way with a growing sense of loneliness!

I reached the warm welcome of our little home just in time for dinner. They were expecting me and it was a regular company dinner—chicken pie and strawberry shortcake.

How well I remember that hour with the doors open and the sun shining brightly on the blossoming fields and the joy of man and bird and beast in the return of summer and the talk about the late visit of Alma Jones and Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln! I told them about the letter of old Kate.

"Fullerton!" Aunt Deel exclaimed. "Are ye sure that was the name, Bart?"

"Yes."

"Goodness gracious sakes alive!"

She and Uncle Peabody gave each other looks of surprised inquiry.

"Do you know anybody by that name?" I asked.

"We used to," said Aunt Deel as she resumed her eating. "Can't be she's one o' the Sam Fullertons, can it?"

"Oh, prob'ly not," said Uncle Peabody. "Back East they's more Fullertons than ye could shake a stick at."

A week later we had our raising. Uncle Peabody did not want a public raising, but Aunt Deel had had her way. We had hewed and mortised and bored the timbers for our new home. The neighbors came with pikes and helped to raise and stay and cover them. A great amount of human kindness went into the beams and rafters of that home and of others like it. I knew that The Thing was still alive in the neighborhood, but even that could not paralyze the helpful hands of those people. Indeed, what was said of my Uncle Peabody was nothing more or less than a kind of conversational firewood. I cannot think that any one really believed it.

We had a cheerful day. A barrel of hard cider had been set up in the dooryard, and I remember that some drank it too freely. The he-o-hee of the men as they lifted on the pikes and the sound of the hammer and beetle rang in the air from morning until night. Mrs. Rodney Barnes and Mrs. Dorothy came to help Aunt Deel with the cooking and a great dinner was served on an improvised table in the dooryard, where the stove was set up. The shingles and sheathes and clapboard were on before the day ended.

Uncle Peabody and I put in the floors and stairway and partitions. More than once in the days we were working together I tried to tell him what Sally had told me, but my courage failed.

The day came, shortly, when I had to speak out, and I took the straight way of my duty as the needle of the compass pointed. It was the end of a summer day and we had watched the dusk fill the valley and come creeping up the slant, sinking the bowlders and thorn tops in its flood, one by one. As we sat looking out of the open door that evening I told them what Sally had told me of the evil report which had traveled through the two towns.

"Damn, little souled, narrer contracted—" Uncle Peabody, speaking in a low, sad tone, but with deep feeling, cut off this highly promising opinion before it was half expressed, and rose and went to the water pail and drank.

"As long as we're honest we don't care what they say," he remarked as he returned to his chair.

"If they won't believe us, we ought to show 'em the papers—ayes," said Aunt Deel.

"Thunder an' Jehu! I wouldn't go 'round the town tryin' to prove that I ain't a thief," said Uncle Peabody. "It wouldn't make no differ'nce. They've got to have somethin' to play with. If they want to use my name for a bean bag let 'em as long as they do it when I ain't lookin'. I wouldn't wonder if they got sore hands by an' by."

I never heard him speak of it again. Indeed, although I knew the topic was often in our thoughts it was never mentioned in our home but once after that, to my knowledge.

We sat for a long time thinking as the night came on.

That week a letter came to me from the senator, announcing the day of Mrs. Wright's arrival in Canton and asking me to meet and assist her in getting the house to rights. I did so. She was a pleasant-faced, amiable woman and a most enterprising house cleaner. I remember that my first task was mending the wheelbarrow.

"I don't know what Silas would do if he were to get home and find his wheelbarrow broken," said she. "It is almost an inseparable companion of his."

The schoolmaster and his family were fishing and camping upon the river, and so I lived at the senator's house with Mrs. Wright and her mother until he arrived. What a wonderful house it was, in my view! I was awed by its size and splendor, its soft carpets and shiny brass and mahogany. Yet it was very simple.

I hoed the garden and cleaned its paths and mowed the dooryard and did some painting in the house.

The senator returned to Canton that evening on the Watertown stage. He greeted me with a fatherly warmth. Again I felt that strong appeal to my eye in his broadcloth and fine linen and beaver hat and in the splendid dignity and courtesy of his manners.

"I've had good reports of you, Bart, and I'm very glad to see you," he said.

"I believe your own marks have been excellent in the last year," I ventured.

"Poorer than I could wish. The teacher has been very kind to me," he laughed. "What have you been studying?"

"Latin (I always mentioned the Latin first), algebra, arithmetic, grammar, geography and history."

He asked about my aunt and uncle and I told him of all that had befallen us, save the one thing of which I had spoken only with him and Sally.

"I shall go up to see them soon," he said.

The people of the little village had learned that he preferred to be let alone when he had just returned over the long, wearisome way from the scene of his labors. So we had the evening to ourselves.

Mrs. Wright, being weary after the day's work, went to bed early and, at his request, I sat with the senator by

I Remember My First Task Was Mending the Wheelbarrow.

the fire for an hour or so. I have always thought it a lucky circumstance, for he asked me to tell of my plans and gave me advice and encouragement which have had a marked effect upon my career.

I remember telling him that I wished to be a lawyer and my reasons for it. He told me that a lawyer was either a pest or a servant of justice and that his chief aim should be the promotion of peace and good will in his community. He promised to try and arrange for my accommodation in his office in the autumn and meanwhile to lend me some books to read while I was at home.

"Before we go to bed let us have a settlement," said the senator. "Will you kindly sit down at the table there and make up a statement of all the time you have given me?"

I made out the statement very neatly and carefully and put it in his hands.

"That is well done," said he. "I shall wish you to stay until the day after tomorrow, if you will. So you will please add another day."

I amended the statement and he paid me the handsome sum of seven dollars. I remember that after I went to my room that night I stitched up the opening in my jacket pocket, which contained my wealth, with the needle and thread which Aunt Deel had put in my bundle, and slept with the jacket under my mattress.

CHAPTER XV.

I Use My Own Compass at a Fork in the Road.

Swiftly now I move across the border into manhood—a serious, eager, restless manhood. It was the fashion of the young those days.

Mr. Wright came up for a day's fishing in July. My uncle and I took him up the river.

While we ate our luncheon he described Jackson and spoke of the famous cheese which he had kept on a table in the vestibule of the White House for his callers. He described his fellow senators—Webster, Clay, Rives, Calhoun and Benton. I remember that Webster was, in his view, the least of them, although at his best the greatest orator. We had a delightful day, and when I drove back to the village with him that night he told me that I could go into the office of Wright & Baldwin after harvesting.

"It will do for a start," he said. "A little later I shall try to find a better place for you."

My life went on with little in it worth recording until the letter came. I speak of it as "the letter," because of its effect upon my career. It was from Sally, and it said:

"Dear Bart: It's all over for a long time, perhaps forever—that will depend on you. I shall be true to you if you really love me, even if I have to wait many, many years. Mother and father saw and read your letter. They say we are too young to be thinking about love and that we have got to stop it. How can I stop it? I guess I would have to stop living. But we shall have to depend upon our memories now. I hope that yours is as good as mine. Father says no more letters without his permission, and he stamped his foot so hard that I think he must have made a dent in the floor. Talk about slavery—what do you think of that? Mother says that we must wait—that it would make father a great deal of trouble if it were known that I allowed you to write. I guess the soul of old Grimshaw is still following you. Well, we must stretch out that lovely day as far as we can. It is the third of June, 1844, we shall both be twenty-one—and I suppose that [illegible] is a long way off, but I will agree to meet you that day at eleven in the morning under the old pine on the river where I met you that day and you told me that you loved me. If either or both should die our souls will know where to find each other. If you will solemnly promise, write these words and only these to my mother—Amour omnia vincit, but do not sign your name.

"SALLY."

What a serious matter it seemed to me then! I remember that it gave Time a rather slow foot. I wrote the words very neatly and plainly on a sheet of paper and mailed it to Mrs. Dunkelberg. I wondered if Sally would stand firm, and longed to know the secrets of the future. More than ever I was resolved to be the principal witness in some great matter, as my friend in Ashery lane had put it.

I was eight months with Wright & Baldwin when I was offered a clerkship in the office of Judge Westbrook, at Cobleskill, in Schoharie county, at two hundred a year and my board. I knew not then just how the offer had come, but knew that the senator must have recommended me. I know now that he wanted a reliable witness of the rent troubles which were growing acute in Schoharie, Delaware and Columbia counties.

It was a trial to go so far from home, as Aunt Deel put it, but both my aunt and uncle agreed that it was "for the best."

How it wrung my heart, when Mr. Purvis and I got into the stage at Canton, to see my aunt and uncle standing by the front wheel looking up at me. How old and lonely and forlorn they looked! Aunt Deel had her purse in her hand. I remember how she took a dollar out of it—I suppose it was the only dollar she had—and looked at it a moment and then handed it up to me.

"You better take it," she said. "I'm 'fraid you won't have enough."

How her hand and lips trembled! I have always kept that dollar.

I couldn't see them as we drove away.

The judge received me kindly and gave Purvis a job in his garden. I was able to take his dictation in shorthand and spent most of my time in taking down contracts and correspondence and drafting them into proper form, which I had the knack of doing rather neatly. I was impressed by the immensity of certain towns in the neighborhood, and there were some temptations in my way. Many people, and especially the prominent men, indulged in ardent spirits.

We had near us there a little section of the old world which was trying, in a half-hearted fashion, to maintain itself in the midst of a democracy. It was the manorial life of the patroons—a relic of ancient feudalism which had its beginning in 1629, when the West Indies company issued its charter of privileges and exemptions. That charter offered to any member of the company who should, within four years, bring fifty adults to the New Netherlands and establish them along the Hudson, a liberal grant of land, to be called a manor, of which the owner or patroon should be full proprietor and chief magistrate. The settlers were to be exempt from taxation for ten years, but under bond to stay in one place and develop it. In the beginning the patroon built houses and barns and furnished cattle, seed and tools. The tenants for themselves and their heirs agreed to pay him a fixed rent forever in stock and produce and, further, to grind at the owner's mill and neither to hunt nor fish.

Judge Westbrook, in whose office I worked, was counsel and collector for the patroons, notably for the manors of Livingston and Van Rensselaer—two little kingdoms in the heart of the great republic.

Mr. Louis Latour of Jefferson county, whom I had met in the company of Mr. Dunkelberg, came during my last year there to study law in the office of the judge, a privilege for which he was indebted to the influence of Senator Wright, I understood. He was a gay Lothario, always boasting of his love affairs, and I had little to do with him.

One day in May near the end of my two years in Cobleskill Judge Westbrook gave me two writs to serve on settlers in the neighborhood of Baldwin Heights for nonpayment of rent. He told me what I knew, that there

A Big, Rough Dressed, Bearded Man Stood in the Middle of the Road With a Gun on His Shoulder.

was bitter feeling against the patroons in that vicinity and that I might encounter opposition to the serving of the writs. If so I was not to press the matter, but bring them back and he would give them to the sheriff.

"I do not insist on your taking this task upon you," he added. "I want a man of tact to go and talk with these people and get their point of view. If you don't care to undertake it I'll send another man."

"I think I would enjoy the task," I said in ignorance of that hornet's nest back in the hills.

"Take Purvis with you," he said. "He can take care of the horses, and as those back-country folk are a little lawless it will be just as well to have a witness with you. They tell me that Purvis is a man of nerve and vigor."

I had drafted my letters for the day and was about to close my desk and start on my journey when Louis Latour came in and announced that he had brought the writs from the judge and was going with me.

"I wouldn't miss it for a thousand dollars," he remarked. "By Jove! I think we'll have a bully time."

"I don't object to your going but you must remember that I am in command," I said, a little taken back, for I had no good opinion either of his prudence or his company.

"The judge told me that I could go but that I should be under your orders," he answered. "I'm not going to be a fool. I'm trying to establish a reputation for good sense myself."

We got our dinners and set out soon after one o'clock. I had read the deeds of the men we were to visit. They were brothers and lived on adjoining farms with leases which covered three hundred and fifty acres of land. Their great-grandfather had agreed to pay a yearly rent forever of sixty-two bushels of good, sweet, merchantable, winter wheat, eight yearling cattle and four sheep in good flesh and sixteen fat hens, all to be delivered in the city of Albany on the first day of January of each year. So, feeling that I was engaged in a just cause, I bravely determined to serve the writs if possible.

I rode in silence, thinking of Sally and of those beautiful days now receding into the past and of my aunt and uncle. I had written a letter to them every week and one or the other had answered it. Between the lines I had detected the note of loneliness. They had told me the small news of the countryside. How narrow and monotonous it all seemed to me then! Rodney Barnes had bought a new farm; John Axtell had been hurt in a runaway; my white mare had got a spavin!

"Hello, mister!"

I started out of my reveries with a little jump of surprise. A big, rough-dressed, bearded man stood in the middle of the road with a gun on his shoulder.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Even a homely man may have a handsome mug in the barber shop.

At a Bargain.

"I would give a thousand pounds to have a little boy like you as my own," said an elderly lady to Tommy.

"That's a rare lot of money, isn't it, ma'am?" queried Tommy, with wide-open eyes.

"Not for me," smiled the lady, "because I've got lots of money and no little children."

"Mother wouldn't let you have me for good," said Tommy slowly, but with conviction, "but—but you may hold my hand for sixpence."—From Blighty, London.

One can often measure a man's debts by the cut of his clothes.

The world moves—from throne to thrown.

Very Much So.

"I will tell you a secret. I cannot marry Emily. There is an insuperable bar to our union."

"Good heavens! What is it?"

"She won't have me."

Artificial legs and arms were in use in Egypt as early at 700 B. C.

Until you do a thing, "efficiency" is only a theory.